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ABSTRACT

The study attempted to: (1) identify and examine college teachers' espoused and implicit theories of teaching, using Menges and Rando's analysis categories; and (2) explore differences between assumptions about traditional and non-traditional students when college teachers based their diagnoses of problematic events on untested speculations. Faculty (N=69) from a metropolitan community college in the midwestern United States were interviewed. Analysis indicated that, overall, a majority of the participants (57%) espoused content theories (CT), 23% subscribed to motivation theories (MT), and 20% indicated adherence to process theories (PT). The majority of the participants (65%) used assumptions to diagnose problematic events and responded by defaulting (68%). There was a significant relationship between espoused theories and diagnoses, but no significant relationship between teaching area (college-parallel or career) and espoused theories, diagnoses, or actions. The results of the study were consistent with some of the findings of Menges and Rando: the majority of college teachers relied on assumptions to diagnose situations that were not proceeding as anticipated. Many participants, especially the CT teachers, attributed more positive characteristics to non-traditional students than to traditional ones, and the extent to which participants relied on untested assumptions for diagnosis and action in problematic situations involving students is a cause for concern. Contains 10 references. (GLR)

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The Teaching Theories of Community College Faculty

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ASSOCIATION FOR THE STUDY OF HIGHER EDUCATION

This paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education held at the Red Lion-Jantzen Beach in Portland, Oregon, November 1-4, 1990. This paper was reviewed by ASHE and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC collection of ASHE conference papers.

The Teaching Theories of Community College Faculty

College teachers are constantly faced with the need to respond to unanticipated classroom events. However, there has been little investigation into how teachers formulate positions about how and what they teach (Clark & Peterson, 1986). In the face of this lack of information, teachers often must rely on professional judgements about what teaching should be and how to respond to classroom events (Bok, 1986). Such judgements may be based, at least in part, on teachers personal theories of teaching.

There have been two approaches to examining how college teachers' conceptualize and reflect on their teaching. The first is case studies (Andresen, Powell, & Wieneke, 1984; Cooper, Orban, Henry, & Townsend, 1983) in which college teachers are interviewed about their preactive (planning) and proactive (reflecting) thoughts as a course progresses. The second approach is reflected in the research of Fox (1983) and Menges and Rando (1989) who described and categorized college teachers' theories about teaching. The purpose of this study was to examine the espoused theories, diagnoses of problematic events, and responses of college teachers using Menges and Rando's (1989) categorizations.

Fox (1983) examined teachers' theories of teaching based on interviews with college teachers. He identified four theoretical perspectives: transfer theory, shaping theory, travel-

ing theory, and growing theory. He also made a distinction between simple theories (transfer and shaping theories) and developed theories (traveling and growing theories). Simple theories reflect a limited relationship between teaching and learning and emphasize a teacher-directed stance. If the subject matter is transferred from the sender (teacher) to the receiver (student), then it must have been learned. Conversely, developed theories reflect a complex teaching-learning relationship and acknowledges the role of the student in the learning process. From this perspective, learning involves more than receiving information, it includes interpretation of the information in the context of the learners' experiences, beliefs, motives, and personal objectives.

Menges and Rando (1989) developed categories for college teachers' beliefs and responses to problematic events using the theoretical assumptions of action theory (Argryis, Putnam, & Smith, 1985). A major principle of action theory is that people devise theoretical frameworks that enable them to explain phenomena in the environment and design purposive action in response. A distinction is made between espoused and implicit theories with espoused theories being the "public" theories that individuals claim as their explanations of situations. Implicit theories, on the other hand, are the theories that guide action and can be inferred from an individual's response to a situation.

Based on the results of their research, Menges and Rando

(1989) identified three analysis categories of espoused theories as those that reflected a content, process, or motivation orientation. Teachers with content theories emphasize the transmittal of knowledge. The focus of the process theory is on understanding and thinking processes whereas a motivation theory stresses the importance of interesting and motivating students. Menges and Rando (1989) identified two categories of diagnoses and two categories of action based on interviewees responses to how they determined the reasons for a specific classroom event and their actions in response to an event. They found that diagnoses were based on either: (1) assumptions about the student, teacher, or content; or, (2) inquiry into the process or content of the event. Action involved: (1) persisting by clarifying some aspectof the event or attempting to stimulate interest; or, (2) defaulting by dismissing, re-teaching, or lecturing.

There were three purposes to this study. The first was to identify and examine college teachers' espoused and implicit theories of teaching using Menges and Rando's (1989) analysis categories. Specifically two research questions were asked: (1) what are community college teachers' espoused theories of teaching; and, (2) how do community college teachers diagnose and respond to problematic classroom events? The second purpose of the study was to examine the diagnosis-action patterns in relation to espoused theories. The third purpose of the study was to explore differences between assumptions about tra-

ditional and non-traditional students when college teachers based their diagnoses of problematic events on untested speculations.

Method

The participants for the study were 69 faculty from a large metropolitan community college in the midwest United States. The data were collected through structured interviews that included descriptions of two common problematic classroom situations and related questions. A third group of questions was also included in the interview. Participants was asked if and how their diagnoses and actions would be different for each situation if the class was comprised mainly of non-traditional students. The interview format that was used had been pilot tested and used in a similar study involving elementary teachers. Slight modifications in wording were made to reflect a college classroom environment. All interviews were conducted by the author and a graduate research assistant who had been trained in the interview format.

The participants were first asked "what is teaching?" in order to identify their espoused theories of teaching. The responses to these questions were categorized according to whether or not they reflected a content, process, or motivation theory of teaching. The participants were then presented with two common problematic classroom situations and asked to respond to a series of questions regarding: (1) their diagnoses as to why the situation occurred; and, (2) how they

responded to the situation. A situation was not discussed if the participant had not experienced it. The two situations were: (1) a class discussion in which no one responded or participated; and, (2) an in-class activity (small group projects, etc) during which the majority of the class was not on task. These situations were chosen because of their focus on student interaction and active involvement. In addition, the participants were asked if and how their diagnosis of the problematic situations would be different if the class was comprised mainly of non-traditional students.

Espoused theories, diagnoses, and actions were coded using the analysis categories developed by Menges and Rando (1989) and frequencies and percentages were calculated for each category The diagnosis-action pairs for the problematic situations were identified and ranked to determine patterns in relation to espoused theory. The data were analyzed to determine whether or not there was a relationship between: (1) the analysis categories (espoused theories, diagnoses and actions); and, (2) the analysis categories and four independent variables (teaching area, years of postsecondary teaching experience, coursework in college teaching, and participation in staff development activities that focused on college teaching). Because the data were categorical, a chi-square statistic was used in the analysis and alpha value to test the hypothesis was set at .05.

Males represented 58 percent of the participants, over one-half had more than 16 years of college teaching experience,

and the majority had master's degrees (74%). Sixty-six percent of the participants taught courses in the college-parallel curriculum and the remaining 34% taught in the career curriculum. The average class size for the college-parallel courses was 28 and for the career courses was 21. The typical class format was lecture-discussion or lecture-laboratory/studio. The demographics were consistent with Keim's (1989) study of community college faculty and the sample was determined to be representative of community college faculty.

Results

The overall results indicated that a majority of the participants (57%) espoused content theories (CT), 23% ascribed to motivation theories (MT), and 20% indicated process theories (PT). The majority of the participants (65%) used assumptions to diagnose problematic events and responded by defaulting (68%).

Analysis of the diagnoses and actions by espoused theories indicated that there was a significant relationship between espoused theories and diagnoses. The teachers who espoused a content theory were more likely to base their diagnoses of problematic classroom events on untested assumptions. Teachers espousing process and motivation theories were more likely to use inquiry as a basis for determining the cause of a problematic classroom event. Eighty percent of the CT participants reported that they used assumptions to diagnose the problematic events. The majority (57%) of (PT) participants indicated that

they used inquiry to diagnose. Assumptions and inquiry were equally used by MT participants to diagnose problematic events.

The actions of the participants were independent of their espoused theories. The majority defaulted (57%) when confronted with a problematic event. Although there was not a statistical relationship between espoused theories and actions, some interesting trends emerged. Approximately, three-fourths of the participants who defaulted espoused content theories with the remaining default actions being fairly evenly divided between the participants who indicated process and motivation theories. Conversely, over three-fourths (86%) of the participants who espoused process and motivation theories persisted.

[INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

There were four possible diagnosis-action patterns: (1) assume-default; (2) assume-persist; (3) inquire-default; or, (4) inquire-persist. Overall, 45% of the participants reported an assume-default pattern; 23% inquire-default; 20% assume-persist; and, 12% inquire-persist. An analysis of the diagnosis-action patterns for each espoused theory indicated that assume-default was the predominant pattern of the CT participants (62%) whereas inquire-persist was the predominant pattern for the PT participants. Thirty-one percent of the MT participants reported both an assume-persist and an inquire-default pattern.

[INSERT TABLES 2 AND 3 ABOUT HERE]

There was no significant relationship found between teach-

ing area (college-parallel or career) and espoused theories, diagnoses, or actions. Likewise, years of college teaching experience, coursework in college teaching, and staff development activities about college teaching were not related to espoused theory, diagnoses, or actions.

When the participants were asked if their diagnosis of the problematic situations would be different if the class were comprised mainly of non-traditional students, 73% of the CT participants who made assumptions to diagnose reported that their assumptions would be different and reported assumptions that reflected a more positive perspective of non-traditional students than of traditional students. The following comment reflects the typical response of the CT participants who perceived non-traditional students more positively: "non-traditional students are more mature, more disciplined, and more eager....they want to give it their best." The majority of PT participants who made assumptions (61%) also attributed positive characteristics to non-traditional students. Although many MT participants attributed positive characteristics to non-traditional students, the majority (56%) stated that their diagnoses of the situation would be no different if the class were comprised mainly of non-traditional students.

Discussion

One major limitation of this study was that data about teachers' diagnoses and responses to problematic events were obtained through stimulated recall rather than by observations.

The participants were asked to recall the event and related questions were not asked if it had not occurred. Responses to questions about the events were based on recollection and could have been subject to interpretation. Furthermore, the reported diagnoses of the events could have been modified by intervening experiences that occurred from the time the event happened to the time that they were asked to recall the event.

The results of this study pertaining to diagnoses and action are consistent with some of the findings of Menges and Rando (1989). The majority of the college teachers in this study and the graduate teaching assistants in Menges and Rando's study relied on assumptions to diagnose situations that were not proceeding as anticipated. This finding is also consistent with Argryis, Putnam, and Smith's (1985) assertion that people tend to base their diagnosis of the cause of unanticipated events on untested assumptions.

The extent to which the participants, particularly those espousing a content theory, relied on untested assumptions to diagnose problematic situations is a cause for concern. Many of the assumptions reflected attributions about students, such as they had not prepared for class, were reluctant to get involved, or expected to be "spoon-fed" the information. Of particular concern, however, is the difference between the attributions regarding traditional and non-traditional students.

As mentioned previously, many of the participants stated

assumptions about non-traditional students that reflected more positive perceptions of them than of traditional students; such as they would have been prepared, were more motivated and eager to learn. Furthermore, when expanding on their views of non-traditional students, many of the participants indicated that they would behave in differently towards them based on those assumptions. For example, one participant said: " I tend to treat older students with more respect and consideration, but then it occurs to me that there is a flaw, we should treat everyone that way."

Menges and Rando (1989) explored the idea that it would be intuitively sensible to expect congruencies between college teachers' implicit and explicit theories. They suggested actions that would be consistent with espoused theories, incorporating a proposition of action theory (Argryis, Putnam, & Smith, 1985) that, in general, people will determine the cause of unanticipated events by making assumptions.

According to Menges and Rando (1989) teachers with content theories would default when confronted with a problematic situation, such as a discussion, because the activity would have been initiated with the intent of imparting information. Therefore, if the activity appeared to be unsuccessful in accomplishing the intended outcome, content theory teachers would stop that activity and initiate another in order to accomplish the intended outcome. Based on this reasoning, a diagnosis-action pattern that would be congruent with a content

espoused theory would be assume-default.

Persisting would be consistent with a process espoused theory because activities such as discussions or in-class activities provide opportunities for students to become involved and actively process the information. Therefore, a diagnosis-action pattern that would be consistent with a process espoused theory would be assume-persist.

Defaulting would be consistent with a motivation espoused theory because MT teachers would engage in a student interaction activity in order to stimulate students' interest. If the activity appeared unsuccessful because students were not responding, the teachers would then default so as not to reduce students' interest and motivation by continuing with an activity that was not accomplishing the purpose.

The results of this study supported the findings of Menges and Rando (1989) that teachers who espoused content theories would make assumptions and then default. However, the propositions that teachers with process theories would generally assume and then persist; and that teachers would motivation theories would generally assume and then default were not supported by the results.

In this study, the general trend for CT participants was to make assumptions (80%) and then default (77%). The typical assumptions of the participants were that students did not have the background knowledge needed for the discussion or had not read the assigned material and consequently were unprepared to

participate in a discussion. The teachers reported that they either re-taught or dismissed the activitiy and continued with a lecture.

Sixty-five percent of the PT participants in this study reported that they defaulted in response to problematic events. Furthermore, the majority of those that defaulted (36%), reported that they did so after a process of inquiry to determine the cause of the event. In general, the participants inquired by asking the students if they had read the material. When the teachers had ascertained that the students had not read, they reported that they went on to another topic. The participants stated that they determined it would be futile to have a class discussion or group activity if the students had not read the information needed to be able to process the information.

One-half of the MT participants defaulted either based on assumptions or, more often, after a process of inquiry. The inquiry usually involved questions to the students about their interest in the topic to be discussed. If the students expressed disinterest, the teachers then went on to another topic. Several participants indicated that they had thought the discussion topic would be of interest to the students, but realized after questioning the students that the topic was of interest only to themselves. Although one-half of the MT participants defaulted, an equal number persisted, usually after making assumptions to diagnose the problem. In this case, the

assumptions of the participants were typically that the students were shy, timid, or afraid of speaking in front of the class rather than not interested. The teachers reported that they then persisted by attempting to ease the students' discomfort and encourage them.

Implications

There are two major implications based on the results of this study. First, the basis by which college teachers diagnose problematic events and the content of their assumptions must be considered in conjunction with their actions in response to unanticipated events. For example, it may be intuitively reasonable to anticipate that a consistent response for college teachers with a motivation theory would be to default if they assumed that the students were not interested in the topic. However, if they assumed that students were shy or reluctant to speak in a group, then persisting might be consistent with that espoused theory.

The second implication is the differences in assumptions about traditional and non-traditional students. Many of the participants assumed that non-traditional students are more motivated, eager to learn, and better prepared for class than traditional students. In comparing younger (less than age 22) and older community college students, Roelfs (1975) found that the older students were more likely than the younger students to be challenged by their classes, spend more time studying, and express greater satisfaction with their studies. Although

the assumptions of the participants are supported by this research, a self-fulfilling prophecy may be occurring when teachers perceive non-traditional students more positively. Furthermore, such assumptions may lead to differential actions towards non-traditional and tradition students as evidenced by comments such as: "I would investigate more methods to draw them [non-traditional students] out, pay more attention to learning styles or experiences" and "I'm more flexible with adult students regarding attendance and exams."

Smith and Schwartz (1988) maintained that knowledge about teaching can be generated by teachers' reflecting on their actions. Reflection may help teachers to identify and examine their frames of reference and, in so doing, they may be able to generate new actions that improve practice. Equally important, however, may be reflecting on the basis and content of diagnoses about the causes of unanticipated classroom events.

Examination of the theories that teachers hold about teaching and how they diagnose and respond to unanticipated events is still a relatively unexplored area. Although college teachers' may be aware of their espoused theories, particularly if they are asked to articulate those beliefs, implicit theories reflect the frames of reference by which experiences are interpreted. As greater emphasis is placed on college teaching, investigation into the relationship between teachers' espoused and implicit teaching theories may illuminate ways to promote and strengthen effective teaching practices.

TABLE 1
ESPOUSED THEORY AND DIAGNOSIS

Espoused Theory	Diagnosis		Actions	
	Assumptions	Inquiry	Defaulting	Persisting
Content (n=39)	80% *	20%	77%	23%
Process (n=14)	43%	57% *	64%	36%
Motivation (n=16)	50%	50% *	50%	50%

* $p < .05$

TABLE 2
DIAGNOSIS-ACTION FREQUENCIES BY ESPOUSED THEORY

Espoused Theory	Action-Diagnosis Patterns			
	Assume/ Default	Assume/ Persist	Inquire/ Default	Inquire/ Persist
All	**45%**	**20%**	**23%**	**12%**
Content	62%	18%	15%	5%
Process	29%	14%	36%	21%
Motivation	19%	31%	31%	19%

TABLE 3
RANKED DIAGNOSIS-ACTION PATTERNS BY ESPOUSED THEORY

Content	Process	Motivation
Assume-Default	Inquire-Default	Assume-Persist & Inquire-Default
Assume-Persist	Assume-Default	
Inquire-Default	Inquire-Persist	Assume-Default & Inquire-Persist
Inquire-Persist	Assume-Persist	

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